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ABSTRACT

A study of nearly 100 freshman community college students' perceptions of their educational experiences and motivations through focus group interviews found that, despite high dropout rates, community college students can become successful students. The study concluded that students will be more likely to persist if institutions help them to be successful at negotiating the transition to college, becoming involved in campus academic and social life, and developing positive attitudes about their learning ability. In efforts to involve students in campus life the campus community must know that nontraditional students will not become involved on their own, that simply offering opportunities for involvement is not enough, and that the key to involving students is to create validating academic and social communities in and out of class. What successful students remember are incidents when they experience validation and when faculty, staff, friends or family members actively reached out to them and affirmed them as capable. Colleges can create in-class validating communities by personalizing the atmosphere, by offering one-on-one feedback, and fostering diverse curricula and positive classroom environments. Out-of-class validating environments require a hospitable campus climate, and an institutional climate that connects the cognitive and social dimensions of the college. (Contains 10 references.) (JB)

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BEYOND INVOLVEMENT: CREATING VALIDATING ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL COMMUNITIES IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Keynote Address
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Beyond Involvement: Creating Validating Academic and Social Communities in the Community College

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The historic mission of the American community college--to provide access for all Americans-- was designed with a simple, yet very powerful notion. We thought that the nation could, in a system of two-year institutions, create a massive community of learners. However, we now know that all is not well in the typical American community college. Over half of all students drop out during the critical first year of college. The statistics are clear. Roughly 68 percent of all two-year college students drop out during their first year, compared to about 53 percent in four-year institutions (Tinto, 1993).

Today, I want to deliver a message of hope. The message comes from community college students themselves. Over the past three years, my research assistant and I conducted focus group interviews with nearly 100 White, Hispanic, African American, Asian and American Indian community college students in Arizona, North Carolina, California and Texas. The students were just completing their first semester of college.

Their message was critical--no matter what their academic and social backgrounds, they could be transformed into successful college students. The study was part of the research conducted by the National Center for Postsecondary Teaching Learning and Assessment funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

We learned that students will be more likely to persist and become excited about learning if we help them be successful at doing three things:

1. **Negotiate the transition to college**
2. **Become involved in campus academic and social life**
3. **Develop positive attitudes about their learning ability**

Negotiating the Transition to College

We often make erroneous assumptions about college students. For example, many of us still tailor our programs to fit the profile of a traditional student who is likely to be male, white, recent high school graduate, under 25, middle class, coming from a family that has attended college, and attending classes full-time, while living on campus (Rendon, 1994; WGHE, 1993).

However, most of the students we interviewed came from nontraditional backgrounds. Some were the first in their family to attend college. Many were working to support themselves and their families. Some were single parents, others were disabled. Still others were attending college after a long hiatus. Students talked about how others had set low expectations for them. An Hispanic male said:

> **I was identified as a gifted child, and by the time I was in my fourth grade my freshman year high school counselor told me to be a brick mason because somewhere in my records they thought my dad was one.**

Several students came from communities that did not expect or encourage them to attend college. An Hispanic male said:

> **The problem is a lot of people have to recognize that we're coming from a community where education isn't a priority. I always imagined that I could not get into UCLA or Berkeley. That wasn't possible for me because I had always been told that I was never going to make it in life, that I should just join the army or something like that.**

Second, we mistakenly tend to believe that the transition to college is relatively easy and similar for both traditional and nontraditional students. There are still a good number of traditional students attending community colleges. One of these was a white woman who told me:

> **My parents always told me that without a good college education I wouldn't be able to get much of a job. I never really thought about not going. I guess I always knew that I would go to college after**

high school.

Another traditional student was a white male who said:

> **It was part of my family after high school to go to college. It was just part of the thing.**

Now compare the traditional student voices with that of a white single mother returning to school after 21 years:

> **(My choice) was one of desperation. My husband had just abandoned me and my two children and I had to fight to get on welfare and when I got on welfare, I didn't want to be on welfare. I never used to be on welfare and I called the Governor's office and I asked them, "what can I do to get off welfare?"...It was sort of a dream that I didn't know after 21 years--I thought that...going to college you had to have some grades from high school like a 3.5 average or something to go to college. I was ignorant that you could go to college and not even have a high school diploma.**

An American Indian student who was the first in her family to attend college told me of a powerful learning experience with her mother that made her feel she had to break away from her family life trajectory. She said:

> **Right before [my mother] died she took me out to the reservation and said, "Do you want to be like this? Sitting around and doing nothing? Or do you want to go on?" So it was probably the reason why I went to college. Because they really have no life out there. She told me that the majority of the Indians that don't go to college or don't finish [high] school just move back to the reservation and just sit there.**

The differences between traditional and nontraditional students are stark. For traditional students, college-going is a natural rite of passage. But for nontraditional students, college-going represents a break from their family traditions. It is often a conscious decision to

escape occupational dead-ends, despair and hopelessness. Nontraditional students often have to navigate competing demands of work, family, culture and school. Traditional students may have to deal with one or two of these demands, but very few will have to confront all four simultaneously (Terenzini, et.al., 1993).

Third, we often fail to understand that to attend college usually requires that a student separate from one world to enter a new one, in the case of a Mexican American student, to move from an Hispanic to an Anglo culture. To make this transition, some students mask or shed their cultural backgrounds in order to assimilate into the mainstream academic culture, which is White. Others struggle with retaining their native cultural identity, while cultivating a new identity that allows them to navigate the world of higher education (Rendon, 1992; Tierney, 1992; Rodriguez, 1975; Weis, 1985; London, 1989, February).

Many first year students begin to experience what Howard London (1989) calls "the agony of choice." They may begin to feel that their identities are changing, that their friends and family don't relate to them the way they once did, that they are leaving their old friends behind, that they are having to deal with separation and loss.

An African American woman told us about how her relationship with her friend changed when she went to college. She said:

> **...My relationship with her has changed a lot since I've been going to college full-time and since I've...been doing good because I see that a lot of my friends...they don't have their goals and their priorities in order. ..My friend, she let me down...because she'd rather run to the club and chase after men all the time...I want to push education, but you can't always tell people something they don't want to hear.**

Not everything about going to college is problematic. I learned that many students experienced the joy of learning, and were proud of themselves for being in college. Yet, they also felt lonely and alienated. A White woman returning to college after some 20 years articulated this irony:

> **That was the loneliest thing for me. I remember talking to my English instructor and I wrote an awful lot in my English (class), and I had no one to bounce myself off. A lot**

of people when I first started college didn't understand why I was coming, weren't supportive, and I would go, "I got an 'A'." There wasn't the enthusiasm so I found that I got my support through the instructors. One time I found myself crying because I didn't have anybody to tell what I was learning about. I realized that I was lonely for people who were supportive of me and what I was trying to do.

Becoming Involved in Campus Academic and Social Life

We now know that involved students are more satisfied with their educational experiences and are more likely to stay in college. I want to commend American River College (ARC) for its efforts to involve students, such as the Student Catalyst Program and the Student Involvement Task Force. Let me share a couple of points that faculty and staff need to keep in mind in their efforts to involve students.

First, most nontraditional students are not likely to get involved on their own. Students who come academically and psychologically unprepared for college cannot get involved easily. Neither can students who are afraid of failure, who feel lost in a strange academic environment that has nothing to do with their out-of-class realities, who don't even know what questions to ask to get help, or who feel that most everyone in their lives has given up on them. An African American male student shared his discomfort about getting involved:

I'm saying that when a student doesn't have that knowledge of the academic world...When you don't know that there is someone you can go to, when you don't know there is an orientation class, when you [just] don't know. When you're apprehensive about approaching people...sometimes it has to do with immaturity, just being exposed to a totally different world.

Second, merely offering opportunities for involvement will not work. Listen to an African American woman who talked about mentoring opportunities in her college:

But is [mentoring] accessible? I'm not trying to argue the point. It is in place, and I'm glad to know that it is in place.

But several things can be in place and if a person's not accessible, if they're hard to get to, if people do not welcome being approached, this makes it hard. And my thing is that, what about freshmen just entering the real world?

In essence, I learned that nontraditional students have not aquired the skills to fully utilize the college. They usually feel like they don't belong. As one student said, **"We're not their kids."**

Third, the key to helping students get involved is to create validating academic and social communities, both in- and out-of-class. Let me make a distinction between involvement and validation. Involvement is the **"time, energy, and effort students devote to the learning process (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in Higher Education, 1984, p. 17)."** Involvement is usually seen as something students are expected to do on their own. Educators see the role of the institution in fostering involvement as passive--it simply affords students the mechanisms to get involved, such as student organizations, learning centers, and extracurricular activities. It's a little like "field of dreams" mentality--if you build it they will come. However, many students do not come despite all of these efforts to promote involvement.

The students we interviewed said very little about the efforts they had made to get involved. What they remembered and became most excited about were incidents when they experienced validation. Validation occurred when faculty, staff, friends or family members **actively** reached out to them and affirmed them as being capable of doing academic work, as well as supported them in their academic endeavors and social development. Students did not see that they could take the initiative to get involved. Instead, they expected someone to reach out to them because they had not yet acquired the skills it took to take full advantage of involvement opportunities on their own.

Developing a Positive Attitude About Learning

We wondered who or what was giving students the idea that they could be successful learners. Two critical points about learning need to be made. First, these students were coming to college not as empty receptacles, but as powerful knowers, although not in a strict academic sense. When we asked students to describe a powerful learning experience, almost always they named something they had learned **before** coming to college. Life knowledge is a major strength

of these students. So is the fact that these students have learned to survive many difficult, even dangerous circumstances.

A student who served in the Marines during Desert Storm was able to save the whole platoon by fixing communications equipment. In the process, he had learned to take responsibility on his own. A Latino who lived in housing projects over the years learned to look beyond poverty and despair. Here's what he told me:

> **I grew up here in the projects. Living here is weird... I see dirty old men and people hanging around the [street] corners drinking their little bottle of wine or whatever. I think, "I don't want to be like that so I better start doing something." Where I live at being complacent is the biggest trap you can fall into. Because once you become happy with where you are and what you're doing, it's like a trap. You [may] never get out...Once I become established in a career I want to come back and try to help everyone that used to live here. I'd tell them, "There's other ways to live." Because a lot of people are born into that. They didn't choose [to live] that way...**

A former gang member had learned the verbal and nonverbal communication skills of L.A. gangs. He was now using these skills to teach gang members about not retaliating against their own people. A woman who had worked in a community hospital had nearly killed a man when she accidentally disconnected his IV and learned that she needed to learn to ask questions and be more aware of work environment.

A second point is that the most important thing community college faculty and staff can do to foster positive attitudes about learning is to validate students --to actively reach out to them to help them believe they can learn and that someone cares about their intellectual and social development. Someone, either in- or out--of-class, has got to help students believe they can be full members of the college learning community. Someone has to help them believe they are cared for. And all of this must happen during the critical first semester of college.

Many students have serious doubts about their ability to do college-level work. Some students have never made an "A" in their lives and many come from backgrounds where they were invalidated--told they would never amount to anything. Unfortunately, many students come to college classrooms only to encounter more invalidating situations.

An African American woman told me when she experienced invalidation in her math class:

> **My math teacher...he has a number. I was a number, you know. Instead of calling us by name, he would call us by our social security number. There aren't many people in class for him to go through all that and it's quicker for him to say my name than my number.**

If we invalidate students, they will likely drop out. We need to help them believe they can be powerful learners. Powerful learners believe they can learn, are excited about learning, are motivated and driven to succeed, feel that what they know is important and valuable, and feel cared about as a person, not just as a student.

Validation can occur in class. An African American student told me about his validating experience with his English teacher:

> **(Some teachers) just come to school to get paid. She came to school to teach you, plus she knew you had hard times, and she understood. It was like if you couldn't come to class one day, the only thing you had to do was call her...If something was wrong, she could tell you how she felt. That's what teachers need to do more. Some just treat you like you're a statue.**

This was a student who had previously failed his English class, and now he related: **"When I look at my report card, I want to go to school."**

A White woman told me **"I did not believe that the instructors would be so personable with each individual and want to teach you."**

And a group of Hispanic students talked about teachers who wouldn't let them drop out. This caused them to want to achieve more, because as they indicated: **"they make you feel like you owe them."** Students also talked about coaches who helped them register for classes and get financial aid, counselors who were supportive, and administrative staff who were friendly, courteous and treated them like "real people."

Validation can also occur out-of-class. Many students were getting significant validation from their family and peers. An African American male conveyed this sort of validation when I asked him to tell me about the most important person in his life:

> **My little brother and my girlfriend. The reason why my little brother is...because he is handicapped and coming from the same place, the same mother and father. There is so much love there. And my girlfriend, she supports me. She never turns me down... She just helps me. And you need that when you're going to school and growing up.**

Clearly, validation helped to change student attitudes, from believing they would fail to acknowledging they could succeed; from thinking no one cared to understanding someone wanted to see them succeed.

Creating Validating Academic and Social Communities

Helping students make the transition to college, get involved and become powerful knowers requires community colleges to reconceptualize their in- and out-of-class environments.

Creating In-Class Validating Communities

1. Remove the invalidating elements that are built into the present academic model. Calling students by number, detaching faculty from students, promoting fiercely competitive environments that instill fear and pit students against each other are just some of the examples of invalidation that need to be eradicated.

2. Faculty should validate students early and often, especially early on in the semester. Students need continuous one-on-one feedback that lets them know how well they are doing. Another way to validate is to structure learning so that students are able to actually see themselves as capable of learning. I asked a group of students to tell me when they felt that they were capable of doing college-level work. A white woman who had expected to fail told me about the time she viewed herself on tape:

> **I don't know quite how to say this, but when you hear yourself talk and [you observe] this individual that has blossomed into**

something that I hadn't even been aware... I would sit in awe, and say, "that's me. Look at you." ... And I liked me. I loved the person coming across on tape. When I started here, I didn't have a lot of love. I felt wounded, and to see me, it was like I understood how other people perceived me... and it made me warm up more and appreciate more the students in my class because I would tell them, "come on, let's do it, let's go for it."

3. Faculty should be engaged in efforts that make their class come alive. When I asked a group of Hispanic students who had helped them learned best, they shared this with me:

...The political science instructor...He's real nice. He's funny. He dresses up. And everybody knows him...He comes like Uncle Sam, or a major or Superman.

I went to get a class with him this semester, but they were all full. Everybody takes him because...he has a way of teaching that...it sticks, it stays there. You know what you're doing because he doesn't just talk. He acts.

And he brings a camera to class, and he had a camera hidden...If [students]fall asleep in his class, he takes pictures. And at the end of the semester, he shows the pictures.

Active learning situations such as collaborative learning, demonstrations, simulations and field trips can be exciting ways to liven the classroom.

4. Faculty and staff must believe that all students can learn and can be taught to learn. Our students are not dumb. We must acknowledge that students come to us as knowers through the power of life experience. The challenge we have is how to translate the power of life knowledge into an academic setting. Faculty should engage in having students relate their life histories and their powerful learning experiences.

5. We must dispel the notion that helping students is tantamount to "spoon feeding." The idea of validating students is **not** to patronize or lower standards to the point that students become weak. The idea is

to unleash the power of learning that is present in all human beings and to challenge students to behave responsibly. I found that students did not want coddling. They wanted to be challenged; to get, as one student said, a **"trophy"** of learning and a **"second library of information."**

6. Faculty should work on transforming the curriculum so that it is inclusive of broad ethnic/racial and gender-related perspectives. I remember speaking to Asian students who told me they felt like strangers in class because nothing in the curriculum was about them. Similarly, Black students told me that American history was incomplete without the inclusion of African American history. A Latino student said:

> **When I started here, I said, "Damn, what am I doing in this school? What am I here for, just for a better job?" But when I took Chicano Studies I said, "Everyday I look forward to going to school because they are teaching me about my history."**

7. Faculty should foster a positive classroom climate. The validating classroom empowers students and creates an atmosphere of trust, respect and freedom to learn. Validating faculty do not assault students with information or withhold information. They do not instill doubt and fear in students. They do not consider themselves the sole source of truth and authority, and they do not separate themselves from students. Instead, validating faculty believe their function is to cultivate, not to weed out, students.

Creating Out-0f-Class Validating Communities

What happens out-of-class is often as important as what happens in the classroom. Fostering an out-of-class validating community requires doing the following:

1. Create a hospitable, comforting campus climate. A validating college climate is not cold and insensitive. Nor does it tolerate discrimination against ethnic/racial minorities, gays and lesbians, the disabled or religious minorities. A validating community college **does see** faculty and staff in patio areas, in the cafeteria, at extracurricular events, etc. actively reaching out to students to involve them, to promote pride in culture, and to form healthy relationships among students, faculty and staff. A validating community college is therapeutic, even spiritual in nature. At its best, it can overcome whatever negative effects are present in a student's life away from college.

2. Build an institutional climate that connects the cognitive and social dimensions of the college. We must begin to see that real learning transcends what happens in the classroom. It is incumbent on faculty and staff to make provisions for out-of-class learning opportunities with students. For example, I was surprised to learn that some students felt that "real learning" occurred at the college's picnic tables. Socialization, as well as learning, took place here. One student told me:

> **Real learning takes place in the patio area because somebody is always experiencing something that you want to experience, so they tell you about it, it's interesting, and they want to share it with you.**

Conclusion

Let us not forget that our students gave us a message of hope. Community colleges can transform students, no matter what their backgrounds, into powerful learners. But this will require a reconfiguration of what we do, how we do it and for whom we do it. In effect, we must transform the community college. We cannot hope to transform students if we ourselves resist transformation. Let's remember what building a community of learners is all about. The process is about invention, discovery, giving hope, loving and respecting others, reaching out, taking risks, and learning from our mistakes. It is about creating a college where failure is nearly impossible. We cannot lose if we inspire more students to believe in themselves. We cannot lose if we give our students hope. And we will never lose if we take the collective possibilities of our students and make them become a reality.

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